

Roundtable

By Steve Cronin

Memorialization Roundtable



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As cremation rates rise, funeral professionals are looking for additional products to interest families. Many of these have taken the form of memorialization products, ranging from large tribute blankets bearing pictures of the deceased to cremation jewelry that incorporates some of the cremated remains into a wearable heirloom memorial. To learn about the latest in memorialization products, we spoke to Adrienne I. Kalmes, vice president of sales for Meadow Hill Corp.; Mark Klingenberger, vice president of sales and marketing at Wilbert Funeral Services Inc.; Samantha Watson, content developer for Frazer Consultants; and Karl Weisenbeck, president of Funeral Home Gifts, about what families want today and how the market for memorialization products will likely change in the future.

Do families understand how memorialization products can help in the healing process?

Kalmes: There are varying degrees of understanding within most families about the connection between memorialization and the healing process. Generally speaking, the people whom we might call emotional caretakers of the family get it. Their understanding flows out of their own experience of loss. These are the family members best able to read those around them, and they know the importance of tactile and sensory keepsakes. The challenge for funeral arrangers is identifying who in the family plays this role. Often they are

not present at the arrangement.

The role of the funeral director is always to educate and enlighten. So when the portion of the arrangement that deals with memorialization is reached, a simple, open-ended question needs to be asked, 'Have you given any thought to keepsakes and other memorial options?' or 'Who is your family's keeper of memories?' How those gathered for the arrangement answer this question lets you know where to go.

Klingenberger: 'Families' in the question is a broad range of many people with different experiences so some do, but most probably do not because they have little experience

making arrangements. It is part of the merchandising and presentation challenge every funeral professional faces.

Watson: Families want something that helps them celebrate their loved one's life, but they don't often think about what comes after the service. Funeral directors need to do a better job of including memorialization in their discussions and helping to find something that will be truly meaningful to the family.

Weisenbeck: Initially after the death of a loved one, they do not. It is at this point that the funeral director becomes an invaluable resource in helping the family by sharing memori-

alization products that will provide comfort, both immediately following a loss and for years after.

What are families interested in when it comes to memorialization?

Kalmes: I have found that families are genuinely interested in unique things that appeal to the senses. Sight, smell and touch are key in that list. The other most important factor is that memorialization products need to be wearable or able to be carried around or worn all the time. In the first months after a loss, this is critical.

Klingenger: Everyone wants to remember the best in the person they have lost and the things that made them special. While sometimes it can be about a sport, car or place, the most popular themes are God, family and country.

Watson: Families want something that's personalized to them and their loved one. There are tons of memorialization products out there these days; the challenge is finding the perfect thing for each family. There are a lot of memorialization products out there that look great, but you can hardly see any sort of personality in them.

Weisenbeck: Families connect with products that depict a loved one when they were alive ... products that families can connect with both visually and physically.

Are funeral directors doing a good job when it comes to explaining memorialization options to families? How can they improve?

Kalmes: Like families and their understanding of the connection between keepsakes and grief, there are many levels of understanding among staff members in the funeral home. Most understand the concept and simply need further training and product knowledge. This is an issue for you to work with the various vendors whose products you offer. There are some, however, who view memorials as mere trinkets or add-ons – nice if you get the sale, but not to worry if you don't. This is more of an

attitudinal issue – one that owners and managers need to address.

A simple first step on the training front is to have every arranger, director and administrator simply read the brochures and materials that describe the offerings. On an annual basis, schedule conference calls or webinars with each of your vendors so they can bring everyone up to date on new products and new approaches. Another area is merchandising. How do your product samples look? Ask yourself if you would purchase something off your display. If the answer is no, replace your tired-looking samples. Consider adding seasonal color or local artifacts to your displays.

Klingenger: Communication skills are paramount in this situation. The challenge is that when you meet the families, there are three distinct communication preferences that individuals have, and the funeral professional ideally needs to connect with all three types. For auditory learners, make sure you have a succinct and consistent verbal explanation of the products you offer as well as things the family can do. For the visual learner, you need to look at the area in your selection room or the slides you are using in an electronic presentation that shows products you sell or conveys ideas that they may want to incorporate into the service. For the kinesthetic learner, you need to have things in the selection room and the arrangement office they can touch. Help them explore how they can be involved in the service and tie in the products you are offering.

Watson: Funeral directors do a pretty good job of explaining memorialization options, but there are a few ways they can improve. One thing that really resonates with families is hearing what others have done. If you can tell them a story about how other families have used the same products and personalized them for their family member, it makes more of an impact than just explaining the product itself.

Weisenbeck: They do an excep-

tional job when they are familiar with products and how they are best presented to the family. Families can be offered Funeral Home Gifts Tribute Blankets, cap panels and keepsake pillows as an a la carte option in a selection room, but they connect most strongly when they are unexpectedly gifted to them and displayed with their loved one (not a generic sample in a selection room) in a personalized display during the visitation and service. It is through the gifting process that families purchase multiple copies for children, grandchildren, etc.

The national cremation rate is expected to exceed 50 percent this year. Have memorialization options for cremation families kept up with the growing popularity of the disposition method?

Kalmes: Vendors are offering more and more options for families who choose cremation. Some of them are poorly designed, cheaply made and will certainly not withstand the test of time. Others are doing great work to address the need. As an industry, we need to conduct more listening sessions where the voice of the customer is heard. What is important to families? How do they want to memorialize their loved ones? These are not easy conversations, but who better than funeral homes to engage their communities in these kinds of discussions?

Klingenger: The numbers of products as well as ideas to incorporate into a service has grown exponentially over the past few years, and most were developed for cremation but will cross over to burial. The greatest challenge may be to not overwhelm the family with too many choices. The greater issue may be that so many of the memorialization products can be purchased from others besides the funeral professional.

Watson: There are tons of memorialization options out there for cremation families, especially when it comes to products that involve the loved one's cremated remains. What's important is

that you consider more than just these types of memorialization products – not everyone will want them, especially if they choose interment. Speak with your families to find out what types of cremation memorialization products best fit their wants and needs.

Weisenbeck: The short answer is yes, and as personalization options continue to increase and evolve, so do the opportunities to counter the challenge of an increasing cremation rate. The rising trend in cremation is a legitimate concern in the erosion of revenue and profitability to a funeral home *business*. In most cases, families don't even know what options they have ... they just know that 'Dad said when I go, just have me cremated.' The proper understanding, selection and presentation of memorialization options allow funeral directors to educate families and provide vision to transition them from a low-cost cremation to a higher value-added personalized memorial service that the family will ultimately be grateful for.

With so many avenues and choices available for memorialization products, how do funeral directors select which products to offer and which to pass on?

Kalmes: Put everything out on a table and rate it using these and other questions you might develop:

What works in this community?

What uniquely captures the memory of the individual?

What is well designed and durable?

What engages the human spirit in a meaningful way?

What lines offer a wide range of choices for all survivors?

What lines offer a wide range of price points?

What lines offer a decent return?

What will be passed to the next generation?

What items require us to do more staff training?

Klingenberg: Taking a look at how people buy other products and services can give you a few simple guidelines to avoid choice overload and focus on

relevant products. While we all like to talk about the exotic things people buy, think in terms of the families you serve and their values. Do not overwhelm people with too many choices. Look for things that will have a high perceived value by the family. Also look for things that may apply to others attending the service so there is a broader base for distribution.

Watson: Economically, it's best to find products that can easily be customized and personalized without having to worry about not having enough of, or having too much of, one particular thing. For example, having blank stationery allows more customization than stationery with preset themes and also prevents waste if a certain theme isn't as popular. It's also really important to consider your customers. Are they more traditional or modern? Do you live in a wealthier community or one with tight budgets? Do you have high or low cremation rates? You know your customers better than anyone, so keep them in mind when you consider which products you should offer.

Weisenbeck: Funeral directors should pick products that bring comfort and warmth with healing abilities. Tangible products that can be felt, held, snuggled and looked at can be extremely healing as opposed to a candle or a bookmark, for example. In other words, funeral directors should select products that will elicit memories, feelings and emotion as well as be useful day to day. Also, these are exactly the types of products that remain displayed and visible in families' homes and keep the funeral director's name firmly ingrained in their mind for years after the service is complete.

Where do you see memorialization options going in coming years?

Kalmes: I think you will continue to see cheaper products hit the market; at the same time, I would anticipate seeing better and better designs, especially in the area of cremation products. Better design generally costs more, but overall, products that are made with higher-quality materials

satisfy customer needs and make them happier.

I believe you will see newer materials utilized, especially on the jewelry side of things. I also think all the technology involved in the production of keepsakes will continue to improve.

Klingenberg: In the future families will be more interested in experiences than products. Instead of focusing on add-on sales of items, you may want to think about delivering events that more people can participate in and remember – those will be more valuable to families. Funeral professionals should be more active in conducting events in other locations in the future, and catering for memorial services and visitations will continue to grow.

Watson: More than anything, funeral directors should be preparing for the next generation. We're used to dealing with baby boomers, but now many Generation Xers are at an age where they are helping plan their parents' funerals as well as planning their own. Gen Xers have more spending power than any other generation, they make up more than 50 percent of all online shoppers, and they like to do extensive research before ever making a purchase.

Weisenbeck: We live in a scrapbooking, personalize everything type of world – and I don't see that changing anytime soon. Especially with cremation on the rise, personalized products are literally all we have to create the 'story' of someone's life. Funeral directors should embrace these changes and be willing to embark on new styles of funerals. Personalized, custom products can actually be a funeral director's best friend in creating a magnitude of emotion for every individual that walks through their door.

Online sales have changed the way we sell everything from books to clothing. Do you think more families will be going online to select memorialization products? Is there anything funeral home owners can do to

protect this part of their market?

Kalmes: The average household orders everything today online. Why shouldn't they avail themselves of memorials in this way?

Absolutely, more families will move to online purchasing ... especially if the experience at the funeral home was less than satisfactory, i.e. the funeral director did not explain, or explained poorly, some of the options available. Funeral homes will need to work with their vendors to see that there are places for online shoppers to select their funeral homes and those who have assisted them.

Klingenberg: Amazon and eBay are growing at an annual rate of over 20 percent. If you Google 'urn for sale,' you'll get upward of 800,000 hits. It's virtually impossible for local funeral professionals to insulate themselves from this kind of competition, so the best opportunity is to provide personal services to create an event that no others can – and then have some add-on memorialization products available.

Watson: Absolutely. We do everything online now – pay bills, socialize, listen to music, watch TV – shopping online is just a piece of the bigger puzzle. Funeral homes that don't have their memorialization products listed online are already behind, so that's the first step they should take. But the savvy funeral homes are past that stage, and are making sure their websites are mobile-friendly since more than half of consumers use smartphones to meet their shopping needs.

Weisenbeck: This is where the relationship with the funeral director is so important – starting with the initial conference with a new at-need family and then moving forward with them as their lifetime go-to death-care provider. Funeral directors can't control what a family does on their own. What they can control is their relationship both during and in between family losses. It also goes back to how items are presented to the family. For example, when Funeral Home Gifts Tribute Blankets and keepsake pillows are

displayed as an unexpected gift to the family in a personalized display at the visitation and service, families don't go back to their computers and look for items. They simply say, 'I need four more of these for each of the children.'

How can funeral professionals best display the memorialization products they offer?

Klingenberg: Four simple things can help:

- Keep some products in the arrangement office if it is separate from the showroom. This introduces memorialization products and allows families more time to contemplate choices.

- Don't just show products, but also show images of people with the products so families can visualize what their experience will be.

- Set the products up in places where they can be picked up and handled by those who might buy them.

- Invest in some personalized samples instead of just showing blank items.

Watson: With more than 81 percent of shoppers conducting online research before buying, displaying products online is becoming increasingly more important. But in addition to the trend of researching and buying online, there also is the added benefit of families sharing these products with relatives that live farther away. While brochures and physical models are useful for families who can actually set foot in your funeral home, you miss a lot of potential with nonlocal family members that might also want memorialization products if you don't have them listed on your website.

Weisenbeck: The most successful funeral directors do not simply display personalization products – they create a 'wow' experience for the family. Once again, this starts with the initial consultation with the family. During this discussion, the funeral director asks good questions and gets to know both the family and the decedent on a personal level. The funeral director should then ask the family to bring as

many personal items and photographs that they can. This not only helps the family members with the first few steps of grief, it gives the funeral director all the ingredients to make a unique, intimate experience.

When is a good time for memorialization products to be brought up in the arrangement conference?

Kalmes: With Thumbies, I have always said, 'Bookend your arrangement ... a sentence at the beginning and a closer at the end. Then send them home with all the materials they will need.' But, the caveat is this – someone needs to follow up at an appointed time.

Klingenberg: It is paramount to bring up options for products and services before the arrangement conference. The best place to do this is on the firm's website. The family has time and feels none of the pressure of the arrangement conference to make a decision in the moment. Having seen items before they come in makes it much easier to add details to what they already know rather than introduce a new concept.

Memorialization products should also be brought up at the beginning of the arrangement conference. Remember, most families have little experience making arrangements so they need to be given an outline of what will be happening, and the selection of those products needs to be presented as a logical part of the process.

Watson: When it comes to planning a funeral, there are a lot of high-stress details that families want to focus on first. Get the big stuff taken care of so that your families aren't worrying about something else when they look at memorialization products.

Weisenbeck: Memorialization can honestly be talked about in every step of the process. As we know, every situation and every individual is different ... and we are talking about grieving people whose thoughts can be scattered. An astute awareness of how and when family members comprehend things is key to the approach. •